In 1917, Canadians took part in a First World War battle that even today is a national point of pride. That battle was Vimy Ridge—a long, heavily defended hill along the Western Front in northern France near Arras. The British and French had tried unsuccessfully to capture it earlier in the war. On April 9, 1917, it was Canada’s turn.

Early that morning, after months of planning and training, the first group of 20,000 Canadians attacked. Through the snow and sleet, Allied artillery laid down a “creeping barrage”—an advancing line of precise shell fire. Soldiers followed closely behind the explosions and overran the enemy before many of them could leave their underground bunkers. Most of the ridge was captured by noon that day, and the final part was taken by April 12. Canada had done it but victory came at a cost—approximately 11,000 of our men were killed or wounded. It has been said that Canada “came of age” as a country that day. For the first time the four Canadian divisions, uniting more than 100,000 Canadians from coast to coast, served side by side and achieved one of the greatest victories in our country’s history.
The Canadian Forces in the Congo

One of the most challenging missions ever faced by Canadian peacekeepers was the United Nations (UN) effort in the Congo from 1960 to 1964. This large African country had been a Belgian colony for 90 years before gaining its independence in 1960. Unfortunately, the new nation was immediately plunged into chaos as a result of local power struggles, inter-tribal tensions, famine, mutiny by the army, international interference and the widespread violence that resulted.

The UN soon sent in peacekeepers to try to restore order and stability. It was a mission undertaking—eventually a UN force of more than 20,000 personnel would serve in the country, including more than 300 Canadians. The UN troops found themselves in a new kind of peace support mission. Violence and weapons were everywhere, but they were able to prevent break-away portions of the country from splitting off. They also helped push out foreign mercenaries who were contributing to the instability. In the end, however, the

UN forces were not enough to stop the greater forces of upheaval rocking the Congo and they departed in 1964. Two Canadian soldiers died during that mission.

Sadly, the situation in the Congo has remained troubled and Canadian Forces members have again been serving in the country since the late 1990s to try to improve the situation.

The First Ukrainian-Canadian General

Joseph Romanow was born in Saskatoon in 1921. One of many Ukrainian Canadians to volunteer during the Second World War, Romanow joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in 1940. He first saw action piloting in anti-submarine (U-boat) air patrols and escorting convoys. After a short stint in England, he was transferred to Burma where he flew Dakotas. DC-3 transport planes and dodged Japanese fighter aircraft. While in Asia, he helped train Gurkha soldiers and served with them.

After the war, Romanow played a role in helping bring more than 35,000 Ukrainian refugees to safety in Canada.

In the post-war years, he graduated from West Point Military Academy, became a general in the Canadian Army, and was the officer responsible for the final installation and operation of Canada’s first nuclear missile site in North Bay, Ontario.

The War of 1812

In the early 1790s, Romanow spent three years in West Germany helping NATO reorganize its air command structure.

The First Ukrainian-Canadian to become a general in the Canadian Forces, he died in Ottawa, in 2011, at the age of 89.

The year 2012 marks the 200th anniversary of the end of the South African War—a time that large numbers of Canadian soldiers served overseas.

Our young country sent troops to South Africa in 1899 to help Britain put down an uprising by Dutch settlers and bring the entire region under its control. Fighting so far too often found in such an unfamiliar setting was very challenging. The Canadians, however, soon earned a reputation for skill and tenacity in the Battle of Paardeberg and the Battle of Rooiwater.

During the war, five Canadians earned the Victoria Cross, the highest award for military valour.

The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging on May 31, 1902. The Dutch settlers surrendered their independence in exchange for and to those affected by the fighting and for eventual self-government. By the end of the conflict, more than 7,500 Canadians had volunteered for service with approximately 280 losing their lives—50 of whom from injury or disease caused by the harsh conditions—and more than 250 being wounded.

First Canadian soldier at a Congolese defensive position in 1963.

Canadian Forces in the Congo

The Will to Live

Etzelbert “Curley” Christian was born in the United States in 1882 and he settled in Ontario as a young man. He volunteered for the army during the First World War, one of the many brave Black Canadians who did so.

On April 9, 1917, Curley Christian was serving with the

Winning Grenadiers during the Battle of Vimy Ridge when artillery fire burned him in a trench. All four limbs were crushed by debris and the wounded soldier was trapped for two days. Found barely alive, he cleared death again when two of his stretcher-bearers were killed by enemy fire while carrying him from the battlefield.

Curley Christian miraculously survived but unfortunately gangrene set in and doctors had to amputate his arms and legs. His positive demeanor remained, however, and he would go on to marry, become a father and live a long and active life until his death in 1948. He is the only Canadian quadruple amputee to survive the First World War.

The Canadian Forces in the Congo

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Did You Know?

in wartime, getting information on the enemy's plans is very important but challenging. This is where spies came in. Often secretly working behind enemy lines, it is very dangerous if, captured, they can expect harsh interrogation and even execution. Many brave Canadian spies, like the ones mentioned below, risked their lives to help the Allies achieve victory.

The Spy from PEI

Clifton Stewart was born in P.E.I. He had a knack for electronics and, by the age of 19, he was a building amateur radio genius. One day, two RCMP officers went to the family farm and informed Stewart that the British secret service wanted to recruit him. They somehow knew that he was an electronics whiz.

Young Mr. Stewart was sent to the British Security Coordination Office in New York City to work on the “Rockies” project with a handpicked team. The machine they developed was used to decipher almost all secret telegrams between London and New York during the Second World War.

Going by the code name WY (because he was the fifth spy recruited from the Western Hemisphere), he moved on to Camp X in Whitby, Ontario. There he honed his craft with other coding and demolition experts. Stewart was sent on top secret missions in occupied Europe. Dropped behind enemy lines, a team of agents would set up radio communications with “the spy from P.E.I.” to relay the briefing containing the coding machine.

Information was gathered and messages sent. Mission accomplished, the team would fly back to safety.

What exactly were these missions? Well that is still not entirely known… Stewart died in P.E.I., with his secrets, at age 91.

Services, credited Stephenson with teaching Americans about foreign intelligence gathering.

The camp was later abandoned, its buildings demolished or relocated, and its records destroyed or locked away under the Official Secrets Act. Today, the former site of Camp X is known as “Intrepid Park,” named after the men and women who trained and worked there.

A Family Tradition at Sea

Ronald Lowry, originally from the Bay of Quinte Mohawk Band in Ontario, was 17 when he was asked to join the Royal Canadian Navy in 1945. The Korean War erupted in 1950 and Lowry soon found himself aboard HMCS Niveva on the other side of the world.

A sonar operator, he kept watch for enemy submarines and torpedoes off the Korean coast. Lowry had also been trained in demolition work. He used these skills when he worked with South Korean and British marines in commando raids to destroy enemy bridges, railways and other strategic installations.

Following the war, Lowry served aboard mine sweepers, cruisers and patrol vessels before retiring after almost ten years in uniform. Coming from a family with a strong history of military service, the tradition continued with Lowry marrying a Wren (a member of the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service) and four of his five sons also serving in the Navy.

A Man Called Intrepid

Manitoba’s William Stephenson was a pilot in the First World War who earned several medals for bravery. His plane was shot down, he was wounded and then captured by the Germans, but managed to escape. He would return to service in the Second World War in a very different role.

Stephenson became chief of the British Security Coordination (BSC) and the brain behind “Camp X.” It was a secret training facility for Allied spies, established near Whitby, Ontario late in 1941. It featured “Hydra,” a sophisticated communications encoding center. Very few people were aware of the true purpose of Camp X, including Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King.

Allied agents were trained there in silent killing, sabotage, demolition, map reading, weapons and Morse code. Once ready, the agents were dropped behind enemy lines to do their work.

Ian Fleming, later famous for writing the James Bond novels, trained at the camp. His Bond character was supposedly based on Stephenson and what Fleming learned from him. Colonel William “Wild Bill” Donovan, head of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, credited Stephenson with teaching Americans about foreign intelligence gathering.

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Super Spies

Gustave “Guy” Biéler was born in France in 1904 and moved to Montreal at the age of 20. When the Second World War broke out, he joined La Régiment de Mont-Royal. His French background and perfect English led him to be recruited by the “Special Operations Executive” in London for espionage training.

Although badly injured while parachuting into occupied France in November 1942, he organized and led the French Resistance’s “Musician” network. Based in Saint-Quentin, the network attacked fuel depots, factories and transportation targets in a large area of northern France. Its sabotage efforts were so effective that the Germans formed a special team to eliminate it. The Gestapo finally arrested Biéler in December 1943.

Despite the extensive torture and starvation he suffered at the Flensburg concentration camp, he revealed nothing to his interrogators. The Germans executed Biéler in September 1944.

Biéler was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Order and made a Member of the Order of the British Empire. Today, a street in Saint-Quentin and a memorial in Montreal bear his name.

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Did You Know?

Canada was far away from most of the fighting during the Second World War, but we were not safe from enemy attack. In late 1944 and early 1945, the Japanese released thousands of large bomb-carrying balloons that high-altitude winds blew across the Pacific Ocean. Hundreds of these explosive devices reached North America and some landed in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. The Japanese hoped the bombs would start forest fires and spread panic, but very little damage resulted.

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Did You Know?

Helicopters were used for the first time on the front lines during the Korean War, proving essential in the evacuation of wounded United Nations troops. Because there was a relatively static front line during the second half of the war, field hospitals could be located near the fighting and the helicopters did not have to fly far. More than a thousand Canadians were wounded. About 40 per cent of Canadian casualties were treated by field medical personnel, not by hospital ships. This was a great innovation, not only for the military but for the wounded themselves.

Highway of Heroes

Canadian Forces members have served in Afghanistan since late 2001 in support of the war on terror and to help stabilize the troubled country. The most dangerous part of Canada’s mission there was in the Kandahar region from 2005 to 2011. Kandahar was a hotbed of insurgent activity and our soldiers had to constantly be on guard anytime they left their camps to go “outside the wire.”

Saddled with more than 155 Canadian Forces members have died in Afghanistan over the years. People have honoured them by lining the overpasses of Ontario’s Highway 401, between Trenton and Toronto, which fallen soldiers travel on their return to Canada. Flags fly, fire trucks and police cars light flash, scouts snap, and men, women and children respectfully stand as the convoy of vehicles passes by. On a stretch of road now known as the “Highway of Heroes,” Canadians remember.

Touchdown for Remembrance

Ontario’s Jake Gaudaur is a Canadian hero. A fighter pilot during the Second World War, he also won Grey Cups as a player and an executive. He was the commissioner of the Canadian Football League (CFL) from 1968 to 1984. Many football players like Gaudaur have also worn a military uniform and exemplified the attributes of Canada’s Veterans: strength, perseverance, comradeship, courage and contribution to community. The Jake Gaudaur Veterans Day Trophy is awarded each year to the CFL player who best personifies those qualities. Jake Gaudaur passed away in 2017, at the age of 87.

The Falcon of Malta

George “Buzz” Beurling was born in Verdun, Quebec, in 1917. In September 1941 he joined the Royal Air Force (RAF). His first action was escorting bombers and flying fighter sweeps across the English Channel. Shortly after his first kill over Calais, France, in May 1942, Beurling was posted to the Mediterranean island of Malta. The Falcon of Malta shot down 17 enemy aircraft in just 14 days and the total of 27 kills was the most by an RAF pilot over the island. For his accomplishments, he received the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Distinguished Flying Medal, and the Distinguished Service Order.

He owed his combat success to good eyesight, excellent shooting skills and the ability to fly his Spitfire like no other pilot would dare. His aggressive style saw him shot down four times over Malta, however, suffering several injuries. On October 31, 1942, while being medically evacuated to Britain, his flight crashed into the sea off Gibraltar. One of only three survivors, Beurling eventually returned to the cockpit with the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Squadron Leader Beurling was the most successful Canadian ace of the Second World War, ending his military career with 31 confirmed kills.

Capitaine Bonhomme

Not all Canadian women spent the Second World War years in uniform or in coveralls. To the women on the home front, Kate Atkins’ voice was akin to welcoming a good friend to their kitchen. Mrs. A, as she was fondly known by her listeners, dispensed household hints, gossip, down-to-earth advice, and current events on her CBC Radio show “Your Good Neighbour.” Her broadcasts even provided a week’s menu based on the considerations of rationing and the produce in season from Victory gardens.

A Good Neighbour

The Ontario native was also a speaker, interviewer, educator and cookbook author. As the conservation director for the federal Wartime Prices and Trade Board, her slogan “Use it up, wear it out, make over, make do” also became a poster. Her “Remake Review” tour even travelled across Canada with new ideas for remixing clothing. Mrs. A’s wartime popularity was so great that in 1945 alone, she received 260,000 letters. She really was a good neighbour!

Did You Know?

A rock memorial honouring fallen Canadian soldiers in the Panjwai’ District will remain in Afghan soil long after our troops leave the region. The stones will remain in Afghan soil long after our troops leave the region. The stones will

The Sawdust Fusiliers

An urgent need for lumber in the First World War led to the creation of a special auxiliary service: the Canadian Forestry Corps. Also known as “The Sawdust Fusiliers,” it was created to supply the huge quantities of wood needed on the Western Front. For every soldier, an estimated five trees were required to build living facilities, make crates to ship food, weapons and reinforcements and even for coffins.

The British government concluded that nobody was more qualified to harvest timber than the Canadians. Instead of shipping the wood from Canada and cutting it into lumberjackies were sent over to cut down forests in the United Kingdom and France.

Did You Know?

According to a leading classes at Waterloo Station in 1922, grew up in Quebec City. He volunteered with the Régiment de Hull in 1943 and joined the Army Show to entertain the troops. He served in the Aleutian Islands in November 1943, and was later sent to Europe, where he fought in the Battle of the Scheldt and in the Netherlands. While in Bergen Op Zoom, Noël was severely wounded by an explosion. A piece of shrapnel stayed in his heel for over four decades. He created a military uniform and exemplified the attributes of Canada’s Veterans:

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